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THE GREAT EJECTION OF 1662¹

By Lee Gatiss

1662 may have been a significant year for the *Book of Common Prayer*. It was not, however, a good year for those to whom the gospel and a good conscience were more precious than the institutional church.

We can rejoice, as we think about the triumph of the *Prayer Book* and its glorious exposition of the Reformed faith in polished liturgical form. But we also need to remember that 1662 was the year that ‘evangelical’ Puritans were excluded from, and then persecuted by, the established Church of England because they could not accept certain aspects of the new religious settlement.

The main problem in 1662 was not with the *Prayer Book* as such, but with the terms of subscription to it. That is, the issue was what to do with those who in conscience could not agree to everything contained in that book.

Consensus

For a century or more, the Puritans, as they were called, had been calling for further godly reformation of the Church of England.

They were delighted with the Reformation, but they thought the English church ‘but halfly reformed’ compared to many Reformed churches on the Continent. The Elizabethan Settlement had not gone far enough for them in eliminating superstition and Catholicism from the church.

They wanted to push on with further reform, in response to God’s Word in the Bible. Such people were usually able to remain within the Church of England. How? Because there was a theological consensus between the official stance of the national church and these Puritans.

In general terms, they were all agreed on what the Coronation Oath calls ‘the true profession of the gospel ... the Protestant Reformed religion’. Historians speak of a ‘Calvinist consensus’ in England, until at least the 1630s. With that general agreement on primary issues of faith and salvation in place, other issues were usually kept in perspective.

Those who did not conform in every detail of clerical vesture or ceremonial and had issues with phrases here and there in the *Prayer Book*, continued to play an active and prominent role within the Church of England, some of them at the highest levels.

Yet these people had been in charge of the national church during the Commonwealth and Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell. They hadn’t all been in favour of chopping Charles I’s head off — many had vigorously protested against it — but they had helped to banish the high church royalist bishops and their prayer book.

Revenge

So when Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, he brought with him an Anglican episcopal hierarchy thirsting for revenge. They quickly established themselves in the royal court and grabbed hold of the levers of power.

The king wanted peace and toleration, but the bishops were in no mood for compromise. For much of 1661 they pretended to make concessions to the Puritans, but only until they were comfortable

enough in their palaces and in Parliament to deal the Puritans a fatal blow.

The tide turned quite quickly. The bishops and their allies now had such strength that there was no longer any question of Puritans attaining a favourable compromise. The issue for the latter had become whether anything could be salvaged from the wreck of their hopes.

Some of our greatest and most internationally famous theologians were from the more evangelical, puritan sections of the church, but the consensus on primary issues was breaking down. And there was less appetite for tolerance on the part of those holding the reins of power.

Without uniformity and theological consensus on what the gospel is, the bishops looked to enforce outward conformity as their way to bring order to chaos. With a more liberal turn in theology at the Restoration, came a more ceremonial, Catholicising style of church.

It was the imposition of this which had helped cause the Civil War in the first place. Most famously, Archbishop Laud, the most prominent and disliked advocate of this anti-Calvinist movement, had been executed on Tower Hill in 1645 to popular applause.

The Puritans could never accept Laudianism. And hitherto had never been forced to, always finding that the Anglican formularies acted as a sufficient guard against the worst excesses of ceremonialism, superstition and persecution.

But now, things were different; the state decided to enforce uniformity across the board.

Act of Uniformity

The Act of Uniformity in 1662 required all ministers not merely to use the set forms of prayer — which may have allowed them some leeway in practice — but to swear an oath they could not in good conscience swear. They had to give ‘unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed’ in the new *Book of Common Prayer*.

This, lamented Richard Baxter, was ‘a weight more grievous than a thousand ceremonies, added to the old conformity, with grievous penalty’.

Furthermore, all ministers, lecturers, and even schoolteachers, had to declare themselves entirely in favour of this new political correctness; they had to swear an oath never to attempt to change anything in church or state!

They had to declare ‘that it is not lawful, upon any pretence whatsoever, to take arms against the king ... that I will conform to the liturgy of the church of England as it is now by law established’ and renounce the oaths of the Solemn League and Covenant, swearing not ‘to endeavour any change or alteration of government either in church or state’.

What’s more, those who had taken the ‘Solemn League and Covenant’ oath — that they would work hard to reform the church according to the Bible — had to renounce that oath and declare now that it was an illegal thing to promise in the first place.

All this, they felt they could not do. Why? Because it was saying in effect that the *Prayer Book* and Church of England were inerrant, whereas they only ever said such things about the unerring Word of God itself.

They did not want to perjure themselves, having made oaths to reform the church in Cromwell’s day; and they could not swear on oath that they agreed with every single word of the liturgy.

Great Ejection

Those with the levers of power in their hands sought to impose a new conformity to the Church of England, to which there could be no legally recognised exceptions whatsoever.

All this was to be enacted on St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1662. A significant day, because it was the day that tithes and rents were due, in arrears, to the clergy. So if any clergy did not conform, they did not get paid and were unceremoniously thrown out of their vicarages, often into poverty.

Attempts were made in Parliament and Convocation to water things down — to provide for ejected ministers, perhaps give them more time and soften the terms of conformity. But these votes were all lost by small margins.

The King and the Lord Chancellor claimed to want a more lenient solution. But they were ignored by those voting.

In total, over 1800 ministers — about 20 per cent of the whole clergy — were forced to leave the Church of England in 1662. They were silenced from preaching or teaching by law. They were barred from positions in church or state and forbidden from meeting, even in small groups in their homes.

The penal code against these dissenters was often enforced with unnecessary brutality and malice. They were spied on, taken to court, fined, and sent to plantations in Virginia for hard labour.

Anglican persecutors could now appeal to a formidable legal arsenal which, potentially, made possible a puritan holocaust. Although the worst possibilities were never realised, 1662 began a persecution of Protestants by Protestants without parallel in seventeenth-century Europe. That was the tragedy of 1662.

Remembering 1662 today

There was a 'Service of Reconciliation' at Westminster Abbey in February to mark this anniversary, with CofE and URC ministers joining together in an attempt to 'heal the memories'. But the established church still needs to face some big questions about whether this sort of thing could be repeated.

Will the Church of England again force its own members' consciences to accept things they see as clearly unbiblical (such as women bishops or homosexuality)? Will it make no exceptions and tolerate no diversity from the current political correctness?

Will the Church of England again become an agent of persecution against Reformed and evangelical Christians? Those who dissent from the prevailing scepticism of the powerful few at the heart of church and government may yet find themselves in an unenviable position, similar to that of Restoration-era Puritans.

The ghosts of 1662 may yet return to haunt the Church of England. Please pray for those attempting to push the denomination back into the great central currents of Christian faith, and away from the dangerous rocks of current fads and baptised worldliness.

Lee Gatiss is Director-Elect of Church Society, and author of The tragedy of 1662 (Latimer Trust).

Endnotes:

- 1) This article was originally printed in the August issue of *Evangelical Times* and is reproduced here with permission from the Editors.